

The Ambiguous Disruption of Gender-Role Expectations in

The Law and the Lady



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ABSTRACT

The main purpose of this research project is to analyse the major female figures in Wilkie Collins' work of fiction *The Law and the Lady*, in relation to the times in which the novel was produced and the situation of women in the Victorian era. After taking into account the major events of the life of the author, as well as the socio-historical conditions of the Victorian period, I try to reach conclusions about whether the author challenges gender-role expectations, presenting the readers with a new form of femininity, or if, on the contrary, he preserves and maintains a conservative, traditional perspective of femininity and female conventions proper to the established parameters of the times in which he lived.

Keywords: Victorian period, Wilkie Collins, *The Law and the Lady*, femininity, sensationalist novel.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Since before I started university, I have had a great passion for literature. In fact, it was one of the aspects that made me finally decide to take the degree that I chose. English Studies seemed to suit me perfectly: it included literature, but also history, linguistics and subjects that could help me to expand my knowledge as a future researcher or teacher. During these four years, I have especially enjoyed studying the Victorian Era, a crucial period of time for England. So I always had the idea of starting a research project about that, and finally this opportunity has come. My purpose was to write about the condition of women during that period, and how it was reflected in the literary fiction of the times.

In order to be more precise, I wanted to focus on one writer, Wilkie Collins (1824-1889). Certainly, I wanted to explain the reasons for the success he achieved as an author, and how he portrayed the women of his society. Some of his major works, such as *The Woman in White* (1860), *The Moonstone* (1868) or *The Law and the Lady* (1875), throw light on the way femininity was perceived in the 19th century and the roles ascribed to women based on the functions women were supposed to fulfil as daughters, sisters, wives and mothers. However, these works also critically approach the negative conditions in which women lived and the situations they had to put up with because of their lack of independence and their ultimate subjection to men. Collins' works, in fact, challenge this situation by presenting heroines who defy conventionalisms and decide to act on their own and effectively function in the public space. Taking this into account, the aims of this research project are to analyse how Collins disrupts these gender-role expectations of the period and whether these disruptions are complete since, even though he wanted to cause a sensation by rejecting the mores of the times, he still had to

please a conservative readership whose beliefs in the sanctity of home and matrimony were very strong. Consequently, I want to reach conclusions about Collins' reluctance to ultimately advance a progressive view of men and women and their role within the family and in the community. It is important to finally know if he disrupts or challenges the perception of femininity in the novel.

In order to conduct my analysis, I focus on one single novel, *The Law and the Lady*. As I have mentioned before, some of his most popular novels have been the object of a lot of critical attention, but my intention is to analyse a less well-known text but which is equally significant and relevant to understand Wilkie Collins' times and his position and ideas about women and men in society. This novel goes beyond the established and places, for the first time, a detective heroine in charge of the investigation of a mysterious murder. Moreover, the text gives me the opportunity to observe the different roles played by the female figures of the times, and reach conclusions about whether they follow the traditional conventions or not. *The Law and the Lady* is a very interesting work of fiction, written in Collins' unique style with a very enjoyable story of a lady in search of the truth of her marriage.

So in order to analyse this work and how the author deals with gender-roles I have read works of reference that focus on Collins' life and his times, as well as critical essays that have helped me understand the literary genre the text belongs to, the sensationalist tradition, which Collins himself started when he wrote *The Woman in White*. There is a large number of works that deal with Victorian times and I have had to be selective given the scope of this project. I have, consequently, selected those that were more relevant to the objectives of my study. As an example, I have found very helpful critical essays such as Winifred Hughes' *The Maniac in the Cellar: Sensation Novels of the 1860s* (1980), or Philip O'Neill's *Wilkie Collins: Women, Property and Propriety* (1988). Furthermore, I have also taken into account some of the essays of experts on Victorian fiction and writers, such as Lyn Pykett or Jeremy Paxman, as well as many other sources that deal with Collins,

Sensationalist fiction and the nineteenth-century background.

I have divided this project into different sections in order to provide a clear structure and to offer a proper approach to the contents. First, I have devoted three sections to the analysis of the contextual information: the life of the author, the historical and social background, and Sensationalist fiction. The objectives of these sections are to analyse the external influences that Collins received and how he reflects or challenges them in his work of fiction. The second part of the project is devoted to the analysis of the novel. As I have mentioned previously, my objective is to focus on the major female figures of the story, and to reach conclusions about whether they break with the established parameters of the times, or if Collins in reality does not draw them as modern women but preserves a conservative, patriarchal mode that would reflect an influence from the society he belonged to.

In conclusion, my intention in this project is to present Wilkie Collins in context in order to gain a better understanding of his work, worries and concerns (especially related to women) through the analysis of one of his most interesting works that has, nonetheless, been neglected by critics and scholars.

2. CONTEXTUAL INTRODUCTION

In the first section of this research project, I am going to describe and analyse some introductory aspects of the background of the novel, as well as the major aspects of the society of the period. It is very important, at the time to make an analysis of a novel, to focus also on the elements "outside" the text. In this sense, being aware of the life of the author is essential because, through it, we will be able to understand his style and manner of writing in a better way, as well as the influences he/she received at the time of writing. Secondly, it is important to know the historical background of the novel and the author, as well as to take into consideration the social context of the period. This is the purpose of this first part of the research project, to know more about the context in order to analyse the chosen novel properly in the next section. The life of Wilkie Collins, the major traits of the morality of the Victorian period and the success that the Sensationalist novel achieved are the aspects analysed below.

2.1. The Life of Wilkie Collins

My life has been rather a strange one. It may not seem particularly...respectable...but it has been, in some respects, adventurous.¹

There can be no doubt that one of the major figures in literature of the 19th century has been Wilkie Collins. His influence, his personality and his brilliant style of writing have turned many of his works into compulsory subjects of study. Many

¹ This quotation is taken from Wilkie Collins' novel *A Rogue's Life* (1879). I have taken it from the Internet in the following page <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/1588/1588-h/1588-h.htm> accessed on April, 12, 2013.

of his stories and novels deal with issues and questions that constitute not only a reflection of his period, but also a link with his own life experience. As Lyn Pykett states, "His origins, his occupation, and his private life all made his own respectability and class position rather ambivalent." (2009:1) That is why it is essential to know about his life in order to understand and fairly analyse his stories, and, above all, in order to comprehend why he goes beyond the established mores of the times and decides to give us a different and interesting perspective of Victorian society.

William Wilkie Collins was born in London on 8 January 1824. His father, William Collins, was a well-known Royal Academy landscape artist, whereas his mother, Harriet Geddes, had been working as a teacher and a governess before marrying Collins. Wilkie Collins decided to honour his godfather, David Wilkie, by using his second name in his published works. In 1828 his brother Charles Allston Collins was born. Their mother became responsible to educate them at home. They grew up in a very religious atmosphere, and their parents were constantly concerned with maintaining a respectable position in society, a matter that later on would not worry at all the famous writer. In spite of their social conformity, Wilkie Collins confessed during his life that he admired and loved them sincerely, describing her mother as "a woman of remarkable mental culture." (Pykett 2009: 3)

It could be said that Wilkie Collins' education was not an ordinary one. He started reading and enjoying literature and writers such as Shakespeare, Byron or Shelley at a very early age. Furthermore, from 1836 to 1838 he moved with his parents to Italy and France, which greatly influenced his life. Later on, he was sent to a boarding school in Highbury, and it was there, according to him, where he started to develop his talent as a story teller. Surprisingly, the reason was simply that he was being continually bullied by an older boy who forced Collins to tell them a story every night before going to sleep. As he admits, "It was this brute who first awakened in me, his poor little victim, a power of which but for him I might never have been aware...When I left school I continued story telling for my own pleasure."

(Pykett 2009: 6)

Collins' first attempts to start his literary career were hidden from his own parents. His father had intended for him to be a clergyman, and continually insisted that he should have a steady income. That is the reason why in 1846 Collins started to study Law. It was not until his father's death in 1847, that he published his first book, entitled *Memoirs of the Life of William Collins*, in which he pays homage to his beloved father. Although he showed little interest in his studies, he finally completed them in 1851, and the truth is that the legal knowledge he acquired was used later on in many of his novels.



Portrait of British writer Wilkie Collins (1824-1889). This picture is taken from the Internet in the following page <http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Wilkie-Collins.jpg> accessed on April, 29, 2013.

It could be said Collins' literary career lasted from 1848 to 1889, but one of the most important events in his life that would influence it occurred in early 1851, when he met Charles Dickens. They became lifelong friends: they regularly dined together, they travelled, they shared interests and they continually worked and collaborated together. Melisa Klimazewski quotes in her work their special relationship; in Collins' words:

We saw each other every day, and were as fond of each other as men could be. Nobody (my own dear mother excepted, of course) felt so positively sure of the future before me in literature, as Dickens did. (2011: 97)

Apart from his special relationship with Dickens, Collins' private life and even his health also influenced his literary career. In 1853, he suffered his first attack of gout, which affected him for the rest of his life. In order to treat it, as well as his depressions and neuralgia, he started using laudanum, and he became addicted to it until his death. In relation to his private life, Collins' sentimental affairs would also deserve to be written as a novel. In 1858 he began living with the widow Caroline Graves and her daughter Harriet. Collins treated Harriet as his own daughter, and assumed the costs of providing her with a respectable education. In fact, he considered them to be his family, remaining with them throughout his entire life, even though he openly disliked the institution of marriage.

The literary career of Wilkie Collins reached its greatest success in the 1860s. According to Klimazewski, "The novels Collins published in the 1860s are the best and most enduring of his career. *The Woman in White*, *No Name*, *Armada* and *The Moonstone*, written in less than a decade, show Collins not just a master of his craft, but as an innovator and provocateur. These four works, which secured him an international reputation and sold in large numbers, ensured his financial stability, and allowed him to support many others." (2011: 67) Parallel to his successful career, it was while searching for background information for *Armada* in a small village named Winterton-on-Sea, that he met Martha Rudd, with whom he began a relationship. At that time, Caroline left him and married a younger man while he was writing *The Moonstone*. She could not forgive him for resisting marrying her. Some years later, in 1869, the first daughter of Collins and Martha

Rudd's was born. Two years after her marriage, Caroline separated from her husband and came back to Collins. Far from rejecting this situation, Collins continued his life dividing his time between his two 'families', supporting them financially until his death.

During the last decade of his life one can observe a decline in the quality of his fictional works, as well as of his health. One of the factors was the death of his beloved friend Dickens in 1870. Almost all the works he wrote during the 1870s and 1880s were regarded by critics as inferior productions that represented a decline in the quality of his style, and a direct consequence of his increasing opium addiction. Finally, on 23 September 1889, a further attack of bronchitis provoked a stroke which ended with Wilkie Collins' death. He single-handedly developed a new genre, sensationalist fiction, and his literary heritage, as well as his social commitment in order to reflect all the nuances and deficiencies of the world of respectable society, turn him into one of the most important figures of the Victorian period.

His literary career left us more than a hundred works, including novels, short stories, plays and novellas. His books have also been adapted into films, and they constitute a very important part of English literary heritage. Here is a list with some of his major works:

- *Memoirs of the Life of William Collins, Esq., R.A.* (1848)
- *Antonina* (1850)
- *Basil* (1852)
- "Mr Wray's Cash Box" (1852)
- *Hide and Seek* (1854)
- "The Ostler" (1855)
- *After the Dark* (1856)
- *The Dead Secret* (1857)
- *A Rogue's Life* (1857/1879)
- *The Frozen Deep* (1857), a play co-written with Charles Dickens.
- "A Terribly Strange Bed" (1858)

- "A House to Let" (1858), a short story co-written with Charles Dickens, Elizabeth Gaskell and Adelaide Anne Procter.
- *The Queen of Hearts* (1859)
- *The Woman in White* (1860)
- *No Name* (1862)
- *Armada* (1866)
- *The Moonstone* (1868)
- *Man and Wife* (1870)
- *The New Magdalen* (1873)
- ***The Law and the Lady*** (1875)
- "Who Killed Zebedee?" (1881)
- *The Black Robe* (1881)
- *The Legacy of Cain* (1889)
- *Blind Love* (1890 – unfinished, completed by Walter Besant).

The number of works Collins published throughout his life is considerably large taking into account his complex personal situation and also his fragile health. In order to understand him better, in the next section I am going to briefly describe the historical and political atmosphere in which Collins lived. Furthermore, I will analyse some of the ideals of Victorian society, as well as the underside of Victorian life, which reveals that people did not always adhere to the sanctioned ideals of respectability and decent behaviour. The objective of this analysis is to clarify the background of the novel I focus on in this research project and to make it more understandable two hundred years later.

2.2. The Social Context, and the Silent Fight between the Public and the Private Sphere

What are we faced with in the nineteenth century? An age where woman was sacred; and where you could buy a thirteen-year-old girls for a few pounds – a few shillings, if you wanted her for only an hour or two. Where more churches were built than in the whole previous history of the country; and where one in sixty houses in London was a brothel [...] Where the sanctity of marriage was proclaimed from every pulpit, in every newspaper editorial and public utterance; and where never – or hardly ever – have so many great public figures, from the future king down, led scandalous private lives. (Fowles 1981: 231)

The historical period in which Wilkie Collins lived was known as the Victorian Era, making reference to the reign of Queen Victoria which lasted for more than 60 years (1837-1901). The 19th century was a period of political agitation and social reform in England.

The Victorian period is characterised by its lights and shadows. As Charles Dickens wrote in his novel *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859):

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to heaven, we were all going direct the other way - in short, the period was so far like the present period, that some of its noisiest authorities insisted on its being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only. (Dickens 1999: 5)

The nineteenth century was a period of advancement in technology, science, and all the aspects of modernity; but it was also a period of poverty, and harshness for millions of people that were forced to adapt to the new times. At the beginning of the 19th century, all the English territory was still rural; but the developments in technology – the invention of sophisticated machinery – and the creation of enormous factories changed the landscape and led to an explosion of modern cities such as London or Manchester. The major consequence of this was immigration from rural areas to these new cities. Many people abandoned their villages looking for better jobs as well as better opportunities and conditions of life. But too many people ended up in cities in order to work in the factories, and there was not enough 'proper' accommodation for all of them. The result was that the immigrants had no other choice than to live in small, dirty and unhealthy spaces, in worse conditions than animals. In addition, the conditions in their workplaces at the factories were not better: they had to work up to 15 or 16 hours per day, without rests and continuously putting their lives into danger.

In the middle of the century revolutionary movements started to take force throughout Europe, and they finally came to England in 1848. Workers began to unite in order to claim for better working and living conditions, and they organised different mass demonstrations throughout the country. As a result of these efforts, some changes began to be implemented in the legislation that regulated working and living conditions, and the middle classes became a powerful force that dictated the political pace of the country. The middle classes also became the guardians of the moral and behavioural values that we associate with Victorianism.

So, in conclusion, almost all the spheres of society started to claim for more rights and to demand better conditions of life and work. And that included women, who saw the best opportunity to achieve "improvements in their civil rights, for increased educational and employment opportunities, and for a life that was not entirely defined in terms of obedient daughterhood or marriage, or wifehood and self-sacrificial motherhood." (Pykett 2009: 47) One of the reasons why women

started to desire a change of their domestic role was the fact that a large majority of working-class women had to start working in factories or workshops of various kinds. As a consequence, the myth of the domestic ideal with women in charge of the household increasingly became more an illusion than a fact.

Before this situation of transition, women, especially middle-class women, were confined to the private, domestic space. The family as a unit became one of the dogmas of the period. According to Kohlke and Gutleben, "[the family], which served as the vaunted microcosm of Victorian society, held to mirror and perpetuated its political structures, social and economic organisation, and individuals' duties and obligations not only to those closest but also towards the wider community." (Kohlke and Gutleben 2011: 2) The morality and idealization of this condition was based on a dominant patriarchal form of familial organisation that gave to the genders different responsibilities and assumptions: men had control over the public sphere, whereas women were confined to the private domain. One of the essays that best summarized this idea of the separate spheres is written by the Victorian critic of art and society John Ruskin (1819-1900). In his essay "Of Queen's Gardens" (1865), he describes the conservative ideal of Victorian womanhood, and he defines the female figure as a "moral force" in order to help men as well as to counter the ills of society:

But the woman's power is for rule, not for battle, - and her intellect is not for invention or creation, but for sweet ordering, arrangement, and decision. She sees the qualities of things, their claims, and their places. Her great function is Praise: she enters into no contest, but infallibly judges the crown of contest. By her office, and place, she is protected from all danger and temptation. The man, in his rough work in open world, must encounter all peril and trial: to him, therefore, must be the failure, the offense, the inevitable error: often he must be wounded, or subdued; often misled; and always hardened. But he guards

the woman from all this; within his house,
as ruled by her, unless she herself has
sought it, need enter no danger, no
temptation, no cause of error or offense.
This is the true nature of home – it is the
place of Peace; the shelter, not only from all
injury, but from all terror, doubt, and
division.²

In this context the ideal figure of the woman was defined as “The Angel in the House”, a title of a poem by the English critic and poet Coventry Patmore (1823-1896), dedicated to his wife. His phrase was used in order to characterise the role of the woman who always tried to be the perfect daughter, sister, wife and mother; the one who took care of the housework and children, and the one who did it without complaining. In comparison with boys, young girls received very little education. It was taken for granted that women should learn some basic skills in order to behave properly and respectfully in society, so the most important subjects they should learn were not mathematics, languages or geography, but music, knitting and good house management. Not only men such as Ruskin wrote about this topic; there increasingly appeared etiquette and conduct books and instruction manuals dictating the characteristics middle-class women should possess, such as the essays written by Sarah Stickney Ellis' “The Women of England”, “The Wives of England”, and “The Daughters of England” in the 1840s. Her objective was to instruct young ladies in order to become perfect housewives and to believe in the rules and pieces of advice Ellis provided in her essay as firmly as if they were a kind of religion:

What can I do to make my parents, my
brothers, or my sisters, more happy? I am
but a feeble instrument in the hands of
Providence, to work out any of his
benevolent designs; but as he will give me
strength, I hope to pursue the plan to which
I have been accustomed, of seeking my own

²

This essay is available in the Internet in the following page <http://www.bartleby.com/28/7.html> and, therefore, the quotation comes from this page accessed on April, 22, 2013.

happiness only in the happiness of others.
(Ellis 2008: 42)

Therefore, the condition of women was relegated to one of submission and acceptance. They had to please men, no matter which age they were: to take care of them became the only and most serious objective in their life. Needless to say, men did not have these kinds of obligations, or these strict rules of behaviour. Of course, they should act according to their social status, and they were supposed to be the breadwinners of the house. However, there is one aspect that is important to take into account in order to understand Wilkie Collins' novel analysed in this project. Men were considered to be strong by default: they had to adhere to an appearance of civility and stiff- upper- lippery, and never to show their emotions in public. However, not all men were comfortable with these notions of masculine behaviour so they had to repress their feelings in order to maintain the ideal of masculinity they were expected to follow.



A portrait of a traditional Victorian middle-class family. This picture is taken from the Internet in the following page <http://www.johnheartfield.com> accessed on May, 2, 2013.

As I have said before, the society of the early and mid-Victorian period was very conditioned by etiquette rules and manners. Homes were described as the place where one could find absolute peace and comfort. Respectability was very important in the sense that appearances had to be maintained, and it was made clear that all the private problems had to be kept locked inside the household, and never see the light or be made public. In actual fact, the reality was not as perfect and ideal as was officially assumed, and the tensions and problems of the private sphere were not always silenced. According to Anthony Wohl, "[The nineteenth century represented] an age where the family hearth was celebrated as the virtuous bower of bliss and sanctuary from the corrupting competitiveness of the outside world." (Wohl 1978: 204-207) This ideal of moral purity may have been the norm that, in theory, regulated people's lives but the reality was totally different. In Victorian Britain double-moral standards existed, and people were very aware of that. One of the major facts that exemplify this is the existence of widespread prostitution that catered for the needs of men. Prostitution was booming by the 1860s, "considered the 'Great Social Evil' and was viewed as the greatest threat to the institution of marriage." (Paxman 2009: 123) It was certainly provoked by men, who "tended not to get married until they had reached a certain financial and social standing, allowing them to provide for a family, and, at all levels of society, the notion of a man gaining experience from a prostitute was tolerated – certainly before marriage, and even after it, when wives were often constantly pregnant." (Paxman 2009: 124) Needless to say, adultery was not acceptable for women who had to face terrible consequences if they were ever found out to have illicit affairs: "If a 'respectable' woman was involved in sexual scandal... it might cause disaster – not only for her, but for all polite society. No moral tragedy could be worse than the destruction of the home brought on by a wife's adultery." (Paxman 2009: 128) Not only adultery represented a disgrace and a sin for women, but there were many myths and theories spread with the objective to subject women and maintain the

patriarchal mode intact:

The prejudice against the working woman ran deep. Ruskin's was just one voice amongst many promoting the idea that women were psychologically different to men, and that if women were taught Latin and Greek, valuable brain space might be used up that could be better used to hone sewing and home-making skills. Women, so the notion went, possessed only a finite amount of strength and the physical demands of menstruation (had Ruskin known about it) and bearing children meant they had less energy for mental activity. There was also a persistent notion doing the rounds that education could tip women into sterility. And on top of all of these was the understandable fear that educated women would take jobs away from men. (Paxman 2009: 142)

So the reality for women was not so 'ideal' and easy as it seemed to be. For those women who received an education and wanted to work, there were not many choices available. In fact, the most common alternative for them was to become governesses in respectable homes. However, even this option was not easy for them. Their situation would be quite strange because they were better paid and treated than servants, but they could never be accepted as close members of the family. As Jeremy Paxman explains, "[the governess] lived in a sort of social limbo." (Paxman 2009: 132) Another possible work options for women who tried to help their families' economy without ending in prostitution was to become a seamstress. For the uneducated women the possibilities were even more reduced: working as domestic servants or as factory hands. In conclusion, the 19th century was a period of constant changes in all domains of life. Family was considered to be sacred but the gap that separated the ideal and the reality was, indeed, very wide.

In the 1860s, a new literary genre was born: the Sensation Novel. One of its main purposes was to provide an intimate portrayal of the 19th-century domestic situation, and of the lights and, especially, shadows that the community had to bear and hide at the same time. In the next section, I am going to define this new genre in order to understand why it became so successful and controversial. In fact, as I stated before, Wilkie Collins is credited as having been the creator of the genre and his most successful literary works belong to the sensationalist tradition.

2.3. The Sensation Novel

There is nothing half so interesting to the great mass of mankind as a mysterious murder in a street cab, or a full-blown adultery made patent in court. (Nietzsche 2006: 132)

The nineteenth century was a period of profound change in novel-writing. When Collins was still a little boy, the novel was regarded almost only as a form of amusement and entertainment, whereas in the last decades of the period, it won the reputation of a serious as well as the dominant literary form. Collins did not publish his first novel until 1850, even though he started writing fiction a decade before, a period dominated by his beloved friend Dickens. But it was not until the 1860s that he wrote some of his most successful novels. In fact, he has been considered as one of the creators of a new literary genre that was born during that decade, mostly to entertain more than educate or provide social commentary: sensation fiction, novels with complex plots that deal with controversial topics such as: persecution and seduction of young girls; crimes such as blackmail, forgery, fraud, murder and attempted murder or illegal incarceration; complex legal plots

involving wills and the inheritance of property; and sexual irregularities such as adultery, forced marriage, marriage forced under a false pretence or bigamy. Even though these novels were mostly a form of entertainment, it does not mean that they do not contain social commentary as I will attempt to demonstrate henceforth through my analysis of the novel I focused on in this project.

According to Winifred Hughes, the Sensation novel exploded onto the literary scene and it became a phenomenon (Hughes 1980: 5). There are many reasons that can account for the appearance of the Sensation novel. It is important to take into account that for Victorian readers these novels were a means to escape from their routines, and in this way they could be entertained forgetting their boring and constrained everyday existence. Many critics also emphasize the close connection between the birth of this genre and the morality of the Victorians. In a society in which people had to keep up appearances and full of rules and strict norms of behaviour, sensationalists wanted to discover the real truth, or at least, some of the defects and hypocrisies of the people living in those times:

By mid-century and throughout the sensation decade, the contradictions in the dominant versions of marriage and bourgeois femininity were becoming increasingly apparent. The plots and central dilemmas of the sensation novel were generated by these contradictions and by the anxieties they produced amongst the middle classes. (Pykett 1992: 65)

Marie-Luise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben also highlight in their research the interest of many Victorian writers in throwing light onto the real conditions of the family, marriage, and social relationships of the period, by combining realism and fiction details such as mystery:

The very ideological elevation of the Victorian family endowed its repeated failure

to shelter and protect with melodramatic and sentimental potential, readily exploited by Victorian artists and writers for shock value and affective appeal, as well as social criticism. For if the very building blocks of civilized society appeared at times to be crumbling, what better way to judge the extent of the rot than to expose its very foundations? (Kohlke & Gutleben 2011: 17)

But apart from criticizing the morality of the period, the main concern of these novels was to cause a sensation, which is to generate suspense and excitement through the manipulation of different feelings such as fear, passion, hatred, jealousy, illicit love or violence. Described as tales of modern life, they were the best-selling novels of their period. But the truth is that these novels brought a considerable degree of moral ambiguity as well as the idea that appearances are not what they seem, and that crime, corruption and dark secrets can also fester underneath the perfect façade of respectability of the middle classes:

The final import of the sensation novel is that things are not what they seem, even – in fact, especially – in the respectable classes and their respectable institutions. At the climax of the Victorian era, the sensation novels portray a society in which secrets are the rule rather than the exception, in which passion and crime fester beneath the surface of the official ideal. (Hughes 1980: 190)

Some of the major representatives of the sensation novel, apart from Wilkie Collins, are the best-selling authors: Mary Elizabeth Braddon (*Aurora Floyd* (1863), *Lady Audley's Secret* (1867)); Rhoda Broughton ('Cometh Up as a Flower' (1867), 'Not Wisely But Too Well' (1867)); Ellen Wood (*East Lynne* (1861), *Lord Oakburn's Daughters* (1864)); or Charles Reade ('It Is Never Too Late To Mend' (1856), *A*

Perilous Secret (1884)). Wilkie Collins is the author regarded as the creator of sensationalist fiction and the most popular of the group, which consisted mostly of female writers that addressed a majorly feminine readership as women constituted as nowadays, the larger group of readers in the 19th century. According to Pykett, "As a novelist who was reviewed as a sensationalist, Collins was thus associated both with female writers (and readers) and with a form of fiction that was perceived to be feminine" (2009: 87) As I established at the beginning of this section, his main objective was to entertain the readers rather than instructing them. He puts this idea into the character of Jessie Yelverton, a character in "The Queen of Hearts":

I'm sick to death of novels with an earnest purpose...of outbursts of eloquence, and large-minded philanthropy, and graphic descriptions, and unsparing anatomy of the human heart...[W]hat I want is something that seizes hold of my interest, and makes me forget when it is time to dress for dinner – something that keeps me reading, reading, reading, in a breathless state, to find out the end.³

Collins' style and attitude were perhaps the causes of his success. He was a very talented writer, and used a variety of first-person narrators in his novels but none of whom possessed the whole truth of the story. This gave an additional bit of suspense and mystery, keeping the readers totally immersed in what they were reading. Furthermore, Pykett summarizes some of the aspects of the technique and style that made Collins an inimitable and legendary author: "Collins was the master of all of the main elements of the sensation genre: the construction and unravelling of an intricate, crossword puzzle plot, the atmospheric scene, the mysterious,

³

This book is available in the Internet in the following page <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/1917/1917-h/1917-h.htm> and, therefore, the quotation come from this page accessed on May, 16, 2013.

prophetic dream, obsessive and disordered mental states, overtly respectable villains, and bold, assertive and/or devious and scheming heroines and villainesses. Moreover, his fragmented, multivocal narratives were the boldest experimentations with narrative form to be found in the sensation mode.” (Pykett 1994:14)



This picture is taken from the Internet in the following page
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/booksblog/2009/nov/26/woman-in-white-150-years-sensation>
accessed on 16, May, 2013.

The truth is that the sensation novel was a very successful genre, as well as short-lived. Many critics state that it helped to transform the moral and cultural landscape of the period. The majority of the population regarded it as a form of entertainment and amusement, but there were sectors of the society that were worried about the influence the genre would have on people's morality and strongly criticized the genre. Moralists disapproved of this type of fiction and preached sermons against them. The Reverend Henry Mansel "consigned the sensation genre to the morbid phenomenon of literature – indications of a wide-spread corruption, of which they are in part both the effect and the cause." (Pykett 1994: 6) And the Archbishop of Canterbury, moreover, found them morally lacking. He wrote:

[S]ensational novels [are] tales which aim at this effect simply – of exciting in the mind some deep feeling of overwrought interest by the means of some terrible passion or crime. They want to persuade people that in almost every one of the well-ordered houses of their neighbours there [is] a skeleton shut up in some cupboard. (qtd. in Pykett 1998: 35)

Not only religious people reacted against sensationalist fiction, but also other conservative and moralist figures of the time, such as the novelist Margaret Oliphant (1828-1897). She similarly despised sensation novels for the corrupting effect they produced on the minds of young girls, who are pressed or advised to pursue their desires and sexual fantasies in these types of novels:

What is held up to us as the story of the feminine soul as it really exists underneath its conventional coverings, is a very fleshy and unlovely record. ...[Since the advent of sensationalism the heroines of English fiction have been] driven wild with love for the man who leads them into desperation...Women who marry their grooms in fits of sensual passion...who pray their lovers to carry them off from husbands and homes they hate...who give and receive burning kisses and frantic embraces, and live in a voluptuous dream...the dreaming maiden waits. She waits now for flesh and muscles, for strong arms that seize her, and warm breath that thrills her through, and a host of other physical attractions...[W]ere the sketch made from the man's point of view, its openness would at least be less repulsive. The peculiarity of it in England...is that this intense appreciation of flesh and blood, this eagerness of physical sensation, is represented as the natural sentiment of English girls, and is offered to them not only as a portrait of their own state of mind, but as their amusement and mental food.

(Pykett 1994:7)

The criticism that the genre received contributed in a great part to its disappearance, so it failed to survive as a genre. However, many writers did not hesitate to incorporate different sensational elements into their own works. Undoubtedly, the genre offered something special that other genres such as realism lacked. Furthermore, sensation fiction also helped establish the foundations of another important genre that would become highly successful and popular: detective fiction.

3. ANALYSIS

In the second section of this research project, and once I have briefly analyzed some background aspects about the author and literary and social context, I am going to introduce the novel analyzed. I will focus on *The Law and the Lady*, a novel published by Collins in 1875, which has been described as one of the first detective novels. The main aim of this research project is to find out how the author portrays women in this novel, focusing on the appearance, behavior and actions that they perform. My objective is to find out whether the characterization of womanhood really breaks with the standards of the times or, on the contrary, Collins preserves conservative mores and values.

3.1. *The Law and the Lady*

There is always something going on beneath
the surface... (Hughes 1980: 22)

As I mentioned above, sensationalists contributed to establishing the foundations of detective fiction. They place a criminal secret that invited a process of investigation in the centre of a household. The secret crime had to be uncovered and the criminal captured and punished by the intervention of an agent, who, in the name of the law, applies his mental faculties to read the clues left by the criminal in order to capture him/her and restore the order in the community. Tony Strong

establishes in a very clear way some of the premises on whose foundations detective fiction is constructed:

The world in which the murder takes place, whether a remote country house, a village, or a professional group, represents what [Auden] calls The Great Good Place. This is an innocent society, a society where there is no need for the law, until the murder reveals that one member is no longer in a state of grace. Then the law becomes a reality, and everyone must live in its shadow until the fallen one is identified. With his arrest, innocence is restored and the law retires again. (1998: 322)

With time, detective fiction became a genre that has produced many different subgenres and one of the most successful and popular among people. The genre, in any case, also sprang from sensation fiction that contributed to some of the genre's characteristics. According to Symons:

The truth is that the detective story, along with the police story, the spy story and the thriller, all of them immensely popular in the past twenty years, makes up part of the hybrid creature we call sensational literature. This hybrid has produced a few masterpieces, many good books, and an enormous mass of more or less entertaining rubbish.

Of course this is not to say that there are no distinctions to be made between amateur detectives and private eyes, but however unlike Sherlock Holmes and Philo Vance may be to Sam Spade and Superintendent Maigret, they all belong to the same kind of literature. ...all deal with violent ends in a sensational way, and although spy stories and thrillers have been discussed separately, it would not have been right to ignore them. The three is sensational literature, and these are among its fruits. (Symons 1992: 17)

Consequently, even though detective fiction started with Edgar Allan Poe's seminal Auguste Dupin's stories – "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" (1841), "The Mystery of Marie Rôget" (1842) and "The Purloined Letter" (1844) – and developed with Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes short stories and novellas, we can say Wilkie Collins wrote many stories that have patterns that echo Poe's stories and prefigure Conan Doyle's texts. Some of his narratives are even considered to be the basis for detective fiction. Some critics regard, for example, that Collins' "The Stolen Letter", written in 1854, is the first British detective story, that the first woman detective appears in the story "The Diary of Anne Rodway" (1856), and that the first humorous detective story is "The Biter Bit" (1858).

The Moonstone (1868), furthermore, has been described as "the first, the longest, and the best of modern English detective novels...in a genre invented by Collins and not by Poe, according to T.S. Eliot." (David 2001: 179). Dorothy L. Sayers referred to it as "probably the very finest detective story ever written." (Hall 1979: 531) Many detective elements appear also in other novels by Wilkie Collins such as: *The Dead Secret* (1857), *The Woman in White* (1860) or the novel analysed in this research project: *The Law and the Lady* (1874).

Wilkie Collins, therefore, contributed to the development of detective fiction. But, as a writer, he was also a detective of sorts concerned with the exploration of his society and the nature of human beings. According to Pykett, "from first to last, his novels explore the multiplicity of factors which shape or motivate human actions." (Pykett 2009: 165) In fact, Collins was very much aware of the function he, as a literary writer, had to perform. Through his novels he depicted the society around him, the manners and behaviour subjected to the mores and conditions of the period. In fact, he used the characters of his novels to analyse and criticize the aspects that he disagreed with. As Pykett puts it, "late-twentieth-century critical re-contextualizations of [Collins'] fiction have continued to produce a version of Collins

as a social detective intent on exploring and exposing the various forms of social discipline and the operations of power – in the law and policing, and also in the structures of marriage and family.” (Pykett 2009: 225-226)

In his latest period as a novelist, Wilkie Collins became even more active in his social commitment dealing with controversial topics such as domestic violence or the instabilities of marriage. *The Law and the Lady* was first issued in serial form in twenty-six chapters in the Graphic between 26 September 1874 and 13 March 1875. It has been defined as a novel which “investigates the significance of marriage as a legitimization of feminine identity that is founded, essentially, on masquerade.” (Bourne Taylor 1992: ix) In this case, Collins chooses a young woman to be the heroine of his work, the first detective heroine in a full-length novel. The story focuses on her quest in order to discover the truth of her husband’s first marriage in order to save her own (Bourne Taylor 1992: x). Valeria Brinton marries her beloved Eustace Woodville even though his family is against their marriage. Some days after the wedding, there are some incidents that lead Valeria to suspect her husband is hiding a dark secret of his past. She then discovers that he had been accused of his first wife’s death, and sentenced with the verdict ‘Not Proven’, implying that he was thought to be guilty but without enough proof from a jury to convict him. Valeria firmly believes in the innocence of her husband, and starts a quest in order to find out the truth of this case. The novel’s starting point, therefore, is the basic objective of detective fiction: the desire to know. According to Bourne Taylor:

As in all detective fiction, two orders of narrative are at work here – the hidden story of the past that emerges through the process of detection and the process of reconstruction through which identities in the present are shaped and confirmed. (1992: xiii)

Collins' first career (as mentioned in a previous section, he studied Law), therefore, had a real influence in the plots of his latest novels. He was very much interested in marriage, divorce and property laws in England and Scotland, as well as all the mysteries and miseries that sometimes resulted from those laws. In fact, *The Law and the Lady* is based on a real case involving a woman, Madeleine Smith, who also got a 'Not Proven' verdict for the crime of poisoning her lover:

Readers may well have remembered the notorious trial of Madeleine Smith, accused of poisoning her paramour with arsenic (the verdict was 'Not Proven'). In the novel, Collins attacks the Scotts court for allowing these verdicts, by showing how the defendant's reputation is tarnished even though they have not been found legally guilty. (Maceachen 1950: 135-138)

So Collins' main objective in writing this text was perhaps not only to highlight and criticize the dark aspects of the Law, but also to draw a new perspective of a woman as the heroine of the story, the detective who wants to discover the truth and who reestablishes the order of her community in order to protect and save her people. Because of the importance of female characters in Wilkie Collins' works in general and *The Law and the Lady* in particular, as well as how he used his characters in order to convey his messages, the section that follows will be devoted to the analysis of the female figures of this novel by Collins, describing his portrayal of femininity and how, through the creation of his heroine and other female characters, he challenges gender-role expectations and exposes the inconsistencies that determined women's lives in the nineteenth century.

3.2. Challenging Gender-Role Expectations

Only give a woman love, and there is
nothing she will not venture, suffer, and do.
(Collins 2009: 11)

One could say that Wilkie Collins' treatment of women in his novels is quite different from the standards of the nineteenth century. He includes heroines in the stories who react against traditional gender-roles. Perhaps one of the reasons why he included a new type of femininity had to do with the special relationship he had with women throughout his life. He valued them more than other colleagues, giving them a power only attributed to men before and finding them to be useful, intelligent, and central to men's lives. Many critical voices have observed the centrality of women in Collins' and other sensationalist writers' works and pointed out how they disrupt the ideals of the times related to femininity:

Whether heroine or villainess, it is always a woman who demands the spotlight in the typical sensation novel. This in turn leads to a conflict between the aesthetic requirements of plot and the conventional social role assigned to women. Because, ideally, 'the life of women cannot well be described as a life of action,' their fictional prominence can only bring about a distortion of the accepted social order. (Hughes 1980: 45)

Hughes highlights the difficulties of placing women in such positions of power and recognition in a nineteenth-century background in which women were reduced to domestic stereotypes. Basically, Hughes reads Collins' treatment of women as an attempt to disrupt the social order and bring to the fore the limitations that constrained women's lives. Other authors see Collins' audacity as just a literary convention, not as an attempt to challenge the status quo:

Collins treatment of women is also complicated by the fact that his intervention may be seen as either a purely formal reaction against specifically artistic stereotyping – (literature needs more colourful female characters) – or, his dispute, with what he sees as the traditional treatment of women, may have ideological and political connotations and mark the gestation of an early feminist consciousness. Collins revamps the stereotype because it will intensify literature, give it more colour and brior and also make it approximate more tightly to life. (O'Neill 1988: 179)

In my opinion, Wilkie Collins was more than a simple controversial writer. He wanted to call people's attention through his works by focusing on one of the most contentious subjects of his period: the role of women. In the novel I analyze, *The Law and the Lady*, there are many examples that seem to prove his desire to change things, or at least, to throw a light into this matter, make people aware of the conditions in which women lived and the injustices that ruled their lives. Collins' female characters seem to be calling for more prominence; they want to have masculine power and leave their old role as simple objects of desire. In this sense, Collins' purpose is clearly to reach the public and to persuade them to reconsider their positions by challenging their preconceptions. As O'Neill puts it, "Collins always had a serious and intense commitment to literature and its effects and functioning in society. [...] Collins is still arguing that good literature should have a

challenging effect on its audience.” (O'Neill 1988:187) Collins' literary purpose was to cause a sensation, to shock the readers and make them think about what they were reading.

In *The Law and the Lady*, Collins' presents a variety of female roles that do indeed have this challenging effect on readers. This is due to the fact that the author wants us to take into consideration how his characters have the ability to break with the established and display quite a different role than the one expected by the society of their times. In order to highlight the most significant aspects of the female characters in this novel, I will analyze them individually, starting with the protagonist.

Valeria Brinton is the heroine of this story. Collins presents her as quite a plain woman, not “at all the sort of person who attracts attention in the street, seeing that she fails to exhibit the popular yellow hair and the popular painted cheeks.” (Collins 2009: 5) But through her thoughts and behavior one can see that she is a very strong and self-confident woman, aware also of the weaknesses of her sex. She has a great autonomy and does not feel intimidated by legal institutions, and she proves to be competitive in a world ruled by men. This confidence is what gives her enough strength to conduct an investigation in order to clean her husband's name and change the verdict of 'Not Proven'. She seems humble when she says: “I am only a friendless woman, who has lost all that she loved and prized, and who is trying to win it back again.” (Collins 2009:214) But in reality she is very much aware of the circumstances that led to her husband's situation and she wants to discover the truth, as we can appreciate in the two quotations that follow:

'My defence was undertaken by the greatest lawyers in the land. ...After such men have done their utmost, and have failed – my poor Valeria, what can you, what can I, do? We can only submit?'

'Never! ...The greatest lawyers are mortal men; the greatest lawyers have made

mistakes before now. You can't deny that.'
(Collins 2009: 94)

What the Law has failed to do for you, your Wife must do for you. ...Are you surprised at the knowledge of the law which this way of writing betrays in an ignorant woman? I have been learning, my dear: the Law and the Lady have begun by understanding one another. ...I mean to win you back, a man vindicated before the world, without a stain on his character or his name – thanks to his Wife. (Collins 2009: 103)

Valeria's personality is very different from her husband's, who is presented as a very weak and tormented man, and throughout the story this difference is made increasingly clear. That is why many critics have questioned the degree of realism of this couple and considered what Collins' real intentions at the time of drawing these characters were. According to Bourne Taylor: "Valeria herself is an ambivalent figure, transgressing wifely roles to give her husband back his name; Eustace is unable to uphold the codes of patriarchal authority, indeed collapses into a ridiculous parody of masculinity in attempting to do so." (1992: xiv)

Another character interesting to describe is Eustace's mother, Mrs. Macallan. Even though she is an old woman, she proves to be honest and helpful with her daughter-in-law. She loves her, and is aware of the great woman she has in front of her. What is even more surprising is that she despises her son when he deserves to, and she recognizes his faults as a husband and as a man:

'Of course not!' retorted the old lady. 'You are like all good women – you make a hero of the man you love, – whether he deserve it or not. Your husband has hosts of good qualities, child – and perhaps I know them better than you do. But his whole conduct,

from the moment when he first entered your uncle's house to the present time, has been, I say again, the conduct of an essentially weak man. What do you think he has done now by way of climax? He has joined a charitable brotherhood; and he is off to the war in Spain with a red cross on his arm, when he ought to be here on his knees, asking his wife to forgive him. I say that is the conduct of a weak man. Some people might call it by a harder name.' (Collins 2009: 174)

In this sense, she can be regarded as a modern woman who is able to see through the established mores of the community and who wants to protect other women (in this case Valeria) from the perils of life.

Apart from Valeria and Mrs. Macallan, there is also an ambivalent female figure portrayed by Collins: Helena Beaulieu, one of the characters suspected of the murder of Eustace's wife. Her name is a game of words by the author. Beaulieu is the stereotypical attractive, aggressive woman that both delights and frightens and who was generally presented as the villainess in the novels of the times. Critics such as Bourne Taylor have paid attention to her characterization:

Helena Beaulieu is presented here as another deeply puzzling character, mistress of the codes of femininity and of disguise: a *femme fatale*. She is indeed revealed to be a mistress of dissemblance, but for her own pleasure. She engages in a substitution plot worthy 'of a French play' to attend a masked ball full of 'ladies of doubtful virtue... and gentlemen on the outlying limits of society'. Her disguise is shown to be playfully transgressive, her suspicious behaviour another false clue, interpreted through Valeria's own jealous projections. (Taylor 1992: xxi)

In other contemporary stories, she would be immediately presented as guilty and malefic. In this novel, Collins wants to change this role by giving her a more innocent 'aura' and blaming us at the same time for our prejudices because at some points in the story all of us think she is the murderer of Eustace's first wife.

Even though these three characters challenge nineteenth-century perceptions of femininity, we readers are free to believe in them as an expression of Collins' intention to present his progressive views through them; otherwise, we can just see them as an opportunistic attempt to create a sensation by disrupting gender-role expectations. In any case, there is no denying that Collins is ambivalent when it comes to advancing his ideas, which leads us to the next section of this project in which I will reach conclusions about whether Collins is actually challenging contemporary values or else he ends up promoting a continuation of a patriarchal mode. Again, through the analysis of the female characters, and the ending of the story, I will try to uncover the conservative discourse that Collins, voluntarily or not, ends up promoting in his novel.

3.3. Back to the Beginning?

It is the nature of Truth to struggle to the light. (Wilkie Collins)⁴

These words that open this section seem to exemplify the hidden ideology of

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This quotation is available in the Internet in the following page
<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/1586/1586-h/1586-h.htm#link2HCH0003> accessed on May, 20, 2013.

The Law and the Lady since, in this novel, appearances are misleading and the development of the novel seems to disprove the progressive ideas he seems to favour through the presentation of his energetic female protagonists. Despite some attempts to create a new, modern woman able to act by herself, Wilkie Collins still preserves a traditional, conservative attitude that can be perceived in his work. In order to analyse this phenomenon, I am going to describe two of the female characters of the novel. Moreover, I will exemplify the conservative traits that even the heroine of the novel, Valeria, has got. And finally, I will try to reach conclusions about how the strong sense of community that was so popular during the nineteenth century could affect both fiction and reality.

First of all, it is important to describe some of the characters that prove, as a whole, the shadow of a conservative perspective. One of these female figures that deserves to be discussed is Eustace's first wife, Sara Macallan. She is described as an ugly, desperate woman who is incapable of satisfying her husband. She is alone, rejected by all the people she has around. Even Eustace cannot understand her, so the only solution that she has is to commit suicide – though the circumstances that lead to her death are not clear and this is why Eustace is investigated as a possible murderer, a fact that, as explained, triggers off Valeria's investigation in order to clear Eustace's name. In fact, Sara wants to die for the benefit of her husband, to free him from the burden she considers herself to be. Here is the last part of the letter she signs before dying:

'Farewell, my dear. I wish I had been a prettier woman. A more loving woman (toward you) I could not be. Even now I dread the sight of your dear face. Even now, if I allowed myself the luxury of looking at you, I don't know that you might not charm me into confessing what I have done – before it is too late to save me.

'But you are not here. Better as it is! Better as it is!

'Once more, farewell! Be happier than you

have been with me. I love you, Eustace – I
forgive you. When you have nothing else to
think about, think sometimes, as kindly as
you can, of your poor, ugly
'SARA MACALLAN.' (Collins 2009: 355)

When reading the novel, one cannot determine if Sara's death and the sensational and melodramatic way in which she says farewell to her husband is intended to produce pity or whether it has some other implications. In fact, her disappearance could be read as a way of getting rid of a woman who seems to challenge the stereotype of her times. This seems to suggest that, since she is not able to become, for her husband, the type of woman that society wanted, the loving wife who guaranteed her family's contentment, she needs to be removed. The frightening conclusion is that Collins had to find a way to get rid of these "disturbing" females in order to comply with the expectations of the times and in order not to offend his readers...too much.

Another female figure that one should take into account, despite her secondary position in the novel, is Ariel. She is the maid of Miserrimus Dexter, the villain of the novel. But probably "maid" is a word too benevolent to describe the horrible situation in which she lives. She is a woman who dresses and speaks like a man, and a slave totally subjected to her master, Dexter. Her identity seems to be removed, she is not able to think, to act, to do anything by herself; she is totally dependent. Even though we could think that this couple Dexter/Ariel could be another of Collins' eccentricities, it would be possible to analyse it in terms of female submission to men. In fact, in many marriages of that period the situation was the same: the woman, without possibility of escape, had to live subjected to her husband, and bear all type of actions and behaviours that came from her partner. Her voice was completely silenced, and through time, she became more and more invisible to the rest of society. Many women, in fact, had to live this kind

of life.

The cases of Sara and Ariel constitute an evident sign of Collins' commitment to the patriarchal ideology of the times. Both Sara and Ariel put into evidence the situation in which women lived. Through them, Collins shows both the expectations they had to abide by as resident 'angels in the house' and the situations of abuse women were often subjected to. However, they are also characters who fail to conform to societal expectations. Sara is determined to soil her husband's name since she feels neglected by him; she is even ready to put his life in danger because he could have been found guilty of her death, a death staged in such a way so as to suggest a murder could have taken place. She also fails to be the woman husbands expected to have, a woman worthy of her husband's devotion. Ariel, on the other hand, behaves and dresses in a masculine way and is determined to go to any lengths to protect the man she loves. Because of their strength and strong personalities, as well as their unorthodox appearance and behaviour, Collins can only envision a tragic finale for them. It is clear that women, therefore, have to be domesticated and conform to female standards of the times in order to survive his novels.

The case of Valeria is perhaps more ambiguous. In the previous section, I have described the aspects of her personality that make her a progressive heroine, the prototype of the New Woman who was asking for more freedom of movement and for an escape from domestic scenarios that became notorious at the end of the nineteenth century. This prototype was, in fact, present in other texts of the times, such as the professional, adventurous Mina Harker in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, or Marian Halcombe, the busybody detective figure in Collins' seminal sensationalist novel *The Woman in White*. However, there are still features of Valeria's character that deserve our attention since they also demonstrate Collins' reluctance to ultimately uphold progressive values.

Valeria is not an ugly woman, in fact, she is quite pretty if we take into account that she seduces the womaniser Major Fitz-David, as well as the fact that

she has all the sympathies of the men of the novel. As I have commented on the previous section, she is strong, clever and self-confident; she is also extremely faithful to her beliefs. Even though the majority of women would have been suspicious of their husbands given the circumstances, in the case of Valeria she never doubts and she seems to believe completely in his innocence. Consequently, all her self-determination is devoted to preserving the good name of her husband, not to gain independence or defend the right of women to have a sway in public affairs. According to O'Neill:

Hers is a limited freedom. Ultimately she is happy to return to a life of wedded bliss and subservience to her husband. She respects the institution of marriage and refuses attitudes such as the Major's bride. (O'Neill 1988: 204)

In this quote, the critic makes reference to another character in the story, the Major's bride, who marries him only for money. Valeria is completely against these money-minded females and she is devoted to traditional values which include a happy marriage and a stable, respectful family with maternity included. In this sense, it is very important to establish the author's final purpose when it comes to bringing the story to an end. The community is a key element for him, as well as for the society of the period. Justice, and the entire investigation of the mysterious death of Sara's are left in hands of the community itself. What is important here is the fact that the community (in this case Valeria) wants to investigate the crimes not only to bring criminals to justice, but to clear the family name and not to jeopardise the honour of its members. In the next quotation, Valeria is firmly convinced of this objective:

When I thought of the future, I had not only my husband to consider now. His good name was no longer his own and mine – it might soon become the most precious inheritance that he could leave to his child. What had I done, while I was in ignorance of this? I had resigned the hope of cleansing his name from the stain that had rested on it – a stain still, no matter how little it might look in the eye of the Law. Our child might live to hear malicious tongues say, 'Your father was tried for the vilest of all murders, and was never absolutely acquitted of the charge.' Could I face the glorious perils of childbirth, with that possibility present to my mind? No!... The honour of the father, the inheritance of the child – I kept those thoughts as constantly as possible before my mind. (Collins 2009: 281-282)

The ending of *The Law and the Lady*, and the attitude that Valeria has, invites us to think that secrets that are too painful should be better kept inside the family circle. The end cannot be more traditional: the sanctity of the home is preserved; criminality is eliminated; and the rightful patriarchal mode, now firmly re-established once Eustace is exonerated and he can recover his position as head of the family, is now able to reign in a brave new world of order, justice and family bliss. O'Neill is one of the critics that seems to be sure of the conservative side of Collins; as he puts it: "Collins' feminist sympathies seem to stop short when he writes further of divorce and the grounds for annulling a marriage. Rather than defend the rights of women, he seems intent on protecting the family at all costs. (O'Neill 1988: 211) We also have to take into account that, in the end, Valeria's victory is purely achieved by chance since Providence intervenes in the last moments to bring proof of Eustace's innocence and put an end to the life of the villain of the story, Miserrimus Dexter. This seems to support the idea that the

heroine is not so successful and competent in a man's world as we believed at the beginning.

Like other contemporary fictional New Women, Valeria is returned to her rightful scenario at the end of her adventure, not only as a wife, but as a mother. The community is left free from external interference, cocooned in the domestic values of the times. Aberrant or disruptive females are eliminated or domesticated. Men abandon their melancholy and misery to become the pillars they were meant to be. The theatre of home is staged to show its best features to the world. And the circle is closed to return to the beginning: the world as it was meant to be, gender-roles firmly reconstituted. Whether we like it or not, the image that Wilkie Collins wants to sell to the readers is still firmly tied to the roots of Victorianism.

4. CONCLUSION

Many literary critics have stated that in order to understand a work of fiction you have to try to go beyond the surface of the text in order to discover its hidden messages. The purpose of this research project was to analyse Wilkie Collins' novel *The Law and the Lady* and try to do exactly this, to delve into the narrative in order to extract its hidden agenda. Specifically, the main objective was to, through the description of the major female figures in the text, reach conclusions about whether the author was depicting a new type of heroine or ultimately conforming to the established parameters of the time and advocating for a traditional form of femininity.

In order to conduct my analysis, I have taken into account background information so as to situate the author in his historical and literary context; reach an understanding of his unorthodox life and ideas; and comprehend the situation in which women lived. These aspects are essential since they have helped me appreciate the importance of the text in the context in which it was written and in the light of the author's thoughts about his society. Consequently, first of all, I have briefly analysed the life of the author, Wilkie Collins. After learning about some of the most important events that he lived through, I have reached the conclusion that his education, his friendships and, above all, his relationships with the different women of his life, exerted a real influence on his perspectives about womanhood. Collins tried to use his literary works, including *The Law and the Lady*, as an open door for the beginning of a new type of woman. In fact, he was the first writer to include a woman as the detective protagonist of a novel.

Apart from his life, I have also looked at the historical background of the novel. The Victorian Era was a period of changes, and the most conservative sections of society were not prepared for the new conditions that were beginning to

change the face of society, especially minorities claiming for their rights and women demanding an equal treatment in all the spheres of society. In the 1860s, however, and perhaps as a result of a relaxation of rules and an attempt to delve into the secrets and injustices that were hidden behind the façade of respectability of the middle classes, a new literary genre was born: the Sensationalist novel, a genre which Collins himself created with the publication of his seminal *The Woman in White*. Like the majority of the novels belonging to this genre, *The Law and the Lady* (1874) not only deals with a mysterious crime, and the resulting process of investigation conducted to elucidate this crime, but also depicts the “tension generated by the secrets of domestic life displayed on the public stage.” (Bourne Taylor 1992: xiv) As an inevitable consequence of the changes that were taking place, which included an awareness of the situation in which women lived within the secret theatre of home and the desire to challenge the secrecy and immunity with which the middle classes protected their skeletons in the cupboard, this new genre endeavoured to bring to the fore the lights and shadows of the real state of marriage and family.

Once I finished the study of the historical and literary background, I focused on the female figures of the novel. The main objective was to analyse how the author challenged gender-role expectations. Through the characters of Valeria or Mrs. Macallan, I could see how they are depicted as a new type of woman: stronger, more confident and capable of taking her own decisions. A deeper analysis, however, revealed evidences that Collins does not totally draw modern women; he just gives them some independence and a strong will to be able to function as active heroines – which is a feat in itself, given the times – but does not ultimately allow them to gain complete liberation outside home-boundaries. Collins, therefore, still preserves a traditional, conservative view of femininity. The women whom he favours as heroines are ultimately faithful and have a stable, respectful marriage and contented family life as their main priorities in life. As a consequence, I can state that Wilkie Collins cannot be considered a (proto) feminist

writer who disrupts the patriarchal edifice of the times, but just a writer who started to portray elements of change in gender-role conditions but did not dare to go beyond that.

As Kohlke and Gutleben write, "Victorian ideologies continue to haunt the present; [...] they are literally lurking in the dark, an insidious absent presence, a past that is not yet or not quite yet past." (Kohlke and Gutleben 2011: 33) We have not yet surmounted some of the inequalities and injustices in gender relations that existed in the Victorian period in spite of the efforts made by some Victorians (and by feminists during the 20th century) in order to challenge and disrupt the situation and condition of women. The truth is that changes of this magnitude, such as those Collins supported through the creation of strong-minded and resourceful heroines like Valeria or Marian Halcombe in *The Women in White* or Rachel Verinder in *The Moonstone*, take a long time to become a reality. But, at least, writers such as Wilkie Collins started to promote a new type of heroine and placed her at the centre of his narratives. He was maybe just trying to cause a sensation, to ruffle the feathers of complacency of the times, but, while doing so, he shows an awareness of the changing situation, and above all, of the real potential of women beyond the private spheres where they were contained.

5. BIBLIOGRAPHY

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